

Exotic, Erotic, Heroic?

Women of Carthage in Western Imagination

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‘Salammbô in her splendour was blended with Tanit,
and seemed the very genius of Carthage, and its embodied soul’

Flaubert, *Salammbô*, ch. 15 (transl. E. Powys Mathers)

Preface

Dido, Sophonisba and the anonymous wife of Hasdrubal – the general who defended the city in 146 BCE – have for centuries inspired the imagination of artists and travellers searching for traces of the grandeur of Punic Carthage. When, in 1807, Chateaubriand visited Tunis and the famous Acropolis of Byrsa, he was inevitably disappointed by the desolate scenery he encountered. Carthage’s indecipherable ruins were certainly no match for the striking memories left by Hannibal and his military campaigns, but also for those left by the heroic women who embodied the spirit of the city and its tragic fate.¹ A similar experience in 1862 inspired Flaubert’s most uncanny creature, the fictional Salammbô, who was about to become the epitome of *fin-de-siècle* feminised eroticism as moulded by Orientalism. Salammbô was the titular character of a historical novel set during the Mercenary War (240 to 238 BCE), through which Flaubert aimed to ‘resurrect Carthage’. Like the legendary and historical

women that preceded and succeeded her, Salammbô was affected by the character and destiny of the Punic city, but also by something dark that inhabits the depths of every human soul.

In the following pages, I will discuss the afterlives of the historical, legendary and fictional women of Carthage in the modern arts. The chapter is divided into four sections that propose four types of characterisations, following a diachronic approach: the tragic, the exotic, the vanished and the resurrected woman. The aim of my contribution is to identify the keys to the enduring legacy and the successful transfigurations of ancient and modern models of representation of the ‘Punic feminine Other’.

The Tragic Woman

The highly popular theme of Dido’s death on the funeral pyre, as depicted in the *Aeneid* (IV, 630-692), has been endlessly reinterpreted by artists. It is a moment that epitomises the double tragedy of the Queen’s death and the anticipated destruction of the city.

My analysis begins with a nineteenth century work: *Dido on the Funeral Pyre* [insert Figure 6.1 here], a lost painting by F. Keller (1877), reproduced as a book-engraving in *Character sketches of romance, fiction and the drama* (1892).² The etching shows a half-naked woman standing upon a sacrificial pyre and altar dominated by a bust of Jupiter. At the woman’s feet lie the spoils of a warrior; remainders of the absent Aeneas. Over these, the bed linen; the tragic souvenir of a love curtailed. The woman is depicted in an erotic, dramatic pose, her gaze turned from the pyre. She looks absent, resigned, lost. Her left arm guides the viewer towards the semi-hidden sword. Queen Dido is about to kill herself with the very sword that Aeneas gave to her as a gift, as Virgil tells us.

Keller’s etching is linked to a text, a short, abridged version of the translation of Virgil by Christopher Pearse Cranch. Dido’s desire to sacrifice herself using the relics of the Trojan hero, the account of her achievements as the founder of Carthage and avenger of her husband

Sychaeus and, finally, the Queen's curse against Aeneas and his descendants – are all omitted from this version. Their deliberate absence reduces Keller's Dido to a suicide provoked by abandonment and deprives the viewer of the more complex characterisation of a Queen crushed by both her emotions and her responsibilities as a ruler. The presence of Jupiter's bust presiding over the scene reminds us of Aeneas' divine fate, which can be neither postponed nor prevented by any mortal. Dido is completely alone with her fate. The dramatic body language of Keller's Dido somewhat recalls the 'madness of love' provoked by Venus within the Virgilian reading of the story; the insane state that fatally transforms her from a loyal widow and responsible ruler into a mad, seductive lover, no longer in control of her emotions, and thus undeserving of life. She is a failed Queen, and thus a failed ruler.

The theme of Dido's death on the funeral pyre also echoes the pre-Virgilian tradition of the self-sacrifice of the fugitive Tyrian Elissa, who preferred to die and remain loyal to her dead husband than marry the local Numidian chief Iarbas.³ This story, set in the eighth century BCE, was conveniently re-contextualised within the aftermath of the Trojan War by the Augustan poet, who presented Dido's death as a curse against the Romans, and a presage of Carthage's own fatal destruction in 146 BCE. In this way, Virgil featured Carthage as a nemesis of Rome, a city destined to die so that the other could live, and a Queen who needed to perish for the hero to leave.⁴ Virgil's version was challenged in the seventh book of Ovid's *Heroides*. Here, the Queen justifies her suicide as an act of redemption for having fallen in love with a treacherous man undeserving of her feelings and generosity. Ovid's Aeneas is nothing more than a man favoured by the gods, with no self-determination. The *Heroides* leave no room for Dido's anger towards the Trojan; her desire to die instead arises as a consequential and courageous act of redemption. Ovid reacted to the Virgilian model of cultural dichotomy embodied by Dido and Aeneas, a model that eschews the irrational, feminised – and thus inferior – Carthage in favour of the rational, masculine, superior Rome. The echoes of 146 BCE resounded very strongly in the post-Actium Augustan agenda, where

Virgilian narratives were a better match for the construction of Eastern otherness represented by Cleopatra and Egypt. To Augustan and early imperial readers, the tragedy of the Carthaginian Dido might have been seen as a truncated precedent of the stigmatised depiction of the Egyptian Cleopatra as seducer of the Roman Marcus Antonius.

Dido's tragic death found a notable echo among Italian Humanists. Giovanni Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* (1374) attempted to trace a clear line between the 'historical' Elissa and the fictitious Dido, as shaped by Virgil. This distinction made it possible to elevate Dido to a model of fidelity and chastity that better suited Christian ideals of womanhood, but also to draw a portrait of a capable ruler.⁵ Multiple illustrated editions and translations of Boccaccio's work contributed to reconstructing a dignified portrait of the Carthaginian Queen.⁶ These positive perspectives on the historical Dido were greatly echoed after the discovery in 1559 of an epitaph traditionally attributed to Ausonius ('Poor Dido found but little rest, by neither of her spouses blest; she flies, because the first was dead, and dies because the second fled').⁷ These verses recall Dido's misfortunes caused by the abandonment of two men – one dead, the other departed. This theme was widely explored within the visual arts.⁸ I wish to specifically consider two relevant works that present this tragedy as a staged drama.

One of the most remarkable examples of Dido's rehabilitation is Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Nashe's play *Dido, Queene of Carthage* (1585-88).⁹ Marlowe and Nashe's Dido mirrors the challenges and anxieties of Elizabethan England, more specifically the Queen's own model of female sovereignty. The play deconstructs the model of the female ruler conquered by passions, instead celebrating the non-Virgilian narratives of a chaste Queen who refuses to remarry the suitor Iarbas. Dido's model of chastity informed Elizabeth's firm decision to remain single. Elizabeth's own political agenda – her conflict with Roman Catholicism and the Habsburgs, and the establishment of prosperous trade agreements and diplomatic relations between England and the Ottoman Empire – would also explain the

blurring of the Virgilian dichotomies in Marlowe's play. Here, Dido and Aeneas no longer embody two opposing, incompatible cultures. She is now the ambitious Queen of an expanding empire that shared certain challenges, preoccupations and character traits with the Tudor monarch.¹⁰ The revisionism of the Virgilian narrative in *Dido, Queene of Carthage* reverted the negative connotations of the Tyrian Queen's death resulting from her inferior condition, both as a woman and a foreigner.¹¹ The play and its reworking of the ancient tradition empowers Elizabeth and Dido with virtues like dignity, chastity and loyalty.

Possibly the most intensively artistic representation of Dido's tragedy remains Henry Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), with a libretto by Nahum Tate.¹² Both the music and the text delineate the contours of a suffering, noble woman who is the victim of a human drama. Dido appears here dispossessed of all the traits that make her a revengeful creature moved by rage, through which Virgil projected a future clash of civilisations. Accordingly, the death of the Queen, punctuated by Purcell's immersive music in *Dido's Lament*, is simply depicted as a natural and stylised descent, liberated from all the paraphernalia that suggested a violent end moved by vengeance (the pyre, the spoils, the 'marriage' bed, the sword).¹³ Dido's eternal words during her *Lament* perfectly synthesise Purcell and Tate's approach to the story: 'Remember me, but ah! Forget my fate.' This fate can be read both individually and collectively when we view Dido as the embodiment of Carthage.¹⁴

The Exotic Woman

This attempt to provide a recognisable foreign context to the tragedy of Dido ran parallel to interest in the historical drama of Sophonisba, as narrated in Livy's account of the Second Punic Wars (30.12-15). The beautiful daughter of the general Hasdrubal was promised in marriage to the Numidian chief Syphax, after the latter defeated his rival Massinissa and became an ally against Rome. When Massinissa joined Scipio Africanus in 204 BCE, he took

Syphax prisoner. In the royal palace at Cirta, he encountered Sophonisba, who begged him for her freedom. He fell immediately in love and married her within the palace. But Scipio obliged Massinissa to reject her and turn her over to Rome. Massinissa decided to send Sophonisba poison, with a note that encouraged her to drink it if she preferred death to slavery. Her dignified decision to drink the cup of poison suggests comparisons with her ancestor Dido. Sophonisba enjoyed a favourable reputation during the Renaissance. Boccaccio included her among his literary ‘noble women’, and Petrarca dedicated the fifth book of his epic poem *Africa* (published after his death in 1397) to her. Comparisons with Dido also became particularly popular among Baroque painters, who tended to give prominence to Sophonisba’s nobleness and decorum, while marginalising the theme of cultural clash between Carthage and Rome.¹⁵ By contrast, Pierre Corneille’s tragedy *Sophonisbe* (1663) staged a drama of passions interwoven with politics and violence. Sophonisba’s suicide is presented here as a necessary end that anticipates the fall of Carthage. Corneille’s Sophonisba is a character who, despite her dignity, is shaped by her disdain towards the Romans.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a new interest in Punic Civilisation arose in connection with European colonialism and the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Chateaubriand’s evocation of the ruins of Carthage exemplified a nostalgic trend associated with the transformed and vanished topographies of ancient, ‘Eastern’ places.¹⁶ This idea boosted the contraposition between Carthage and Rome, the Ottoman Empire and the colonial ambitions of the European nations. It also explained to a certain degree the birth of a fictitious character inspired by Dido and Sophonisba, who was destined to surpass them as the exotic and eroticised icon of Carthage in *fin-de-siècle* imagination.

*‘Je ne suis pas une femme, je suis un monde. Mes vêtements n’ont qu’à tomber, et tu découvriras sur ma personne une succession de mystères!’*¹⁷ The erotic mysteries awaiting Saint Antony beneath the clothes of the Queen of Sheba in *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*

(1849; 1856, 1874) reveal clues about Gustave Flaubert's fascination with the Orient and the creation of *Salammbô*. As Edward Said has noted, Flaubert's image of the Orient was 'eminently corporeal', an attractive but also enigmatic realm epitomised by the body of a woman. His *Salammbô*, like *Salomé* and the Queen of Sheba, seems to have been first inspired by the famous Egyptian dancer Kuchuk Hanem, whose exuberant and intriguing sexuality personally captivated Flaubert when he met her in Wadi Halfa.¹⁸

Beyond Kuchuk's immanent presence in the contours of Flaubert's oriental women, *Salammbô* (1862) aimed to, in his own words, '*ressusciter Carthage*', to recreate a lost world, a chronologically and spatially distanced place.¹⁹ The historical framework for the story was the war between the Carthaginians and the Mercenaries during the aftermath of the First Punic War (241 BCE).²⁰ This crisis concluded with the victory of the Republic, led by Hamilcar Barca, and the execution of the insurgents. The fictional character of *Salammbô*, and her relationship with the barbarian Mathô, added a necessary ingredient of erotic exoticism. This choice of historical event intentionally avoided the best-known confrontation between Rome and Carthage in the Second Punic War, which tended to be extrapolated into modern political discourses. Michelet's *Histoire Romaine: République* (1835), one of Flaubert's most influential texts, conceived the rise and fall of Carthage as part of a rational narrative that elevated Rome to a superior civilisation that would give birth to Europe.²¹ Flaubert moved away from this conventional scenario. For this reason, he was openly attacked by his most fervent critic, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, who believed that any historical novel should deal with events relevant to the present.²² Unlike Chateaubriand, Flaubert was not disappointed by the ruins of Carthage. He made the most of his travels to Tunisia and other regions, capturing ideas, images and sensory experiences that he revamped within the novel.²³ His own, accurate research allowed him to recreate an imaginary, yet archaeologically plausible, ancient Carthage.

Flaubert's city feels real. On a deeper level, the remoteness of his Carthage suited his aim to provoke and challenge traditional, rational and moralising conceptions of history as moulded by anthropocentrism. He aimed to show that human history is ultimately determined by the unpredictable and implacable forces of nature. Flaubert presents Carthage as a place dominated by a continuous cycle of renovation and destruction, as embodied by the gods Tanit and Moloch.²⁴ All the characters within the novel are ruled by a deep spirituality, obscure passions and certain doses of violence.²⁵ The exotic strangeness of the place also applies to the protagonist. Salammbô is depicted as a fascinating yet uncanny woman, and her sudden death following Mathô's ritualised torment is a necessary step in the cycle of life and death that dominates Carthage. The spirit of Dido, but also that of Sophonisba, are both fundamental to understanding Flaubert's construction of Salammbô. Her suggested assimilation with Tanit explains her death as a form of regeneration for the city.

The uncommon visual qualities of this post-romantic novel were recognised by Flaubert's contemporaries.²⁶ They also explain why Salammbô subsequently reached the status of diva within *Décadence* and *fin-de-siècle* imageries.²⁷ The fact that Flaubert explicitly forbade any illustration of the novel during his lifetime, as he was convinced that a visualisation of Salammbô and his Carthage would kill the reader's imagination,²⁸ likely contributed to her popular 'mythification'.

Salammbô's eroticism is a consistent element in the afterlife of Flaubert's heroine.²⁹ Often, this idea is explicitly underlined through nudity, as is the case with the iconic polychrome image created by Alphonse Mucha in *Incantation* (1896). This visually stunning lithograph invites the viewer to a sensorial experience. This work elevated Salammbô to the status of an irresistible muse of Art Nouveau and inspired countless voyeuristic fantasies of temporally undefined 'Oriental nights'.³⁰

The difficulties in capturing Salammbô's disturbing characterisation are well-reflected in the work of Gaston Bussière who, influenced by Mucha and Gustave Moreau, explored the

theme from various aesthetic angles. The evolution of the artist took him from Romantic Symbolism inspired by Germanic and medieval mythologies to a study of Orientalism centred around the female body. His *Salammbô* (1907) is an exquisite 'medium shot' of a young, lavishly-clothed, curly-haired blonde woman. Her intense blue eyes stare directly at the viewer, and although her pose is serene and seemingly innocent, the gaze provokes a certain discomfort.³¹ Bussière's work as illustrator for the novel, alongside his increasing interest in odalisques, dancers of the seven veils and, in general, eroticised women set in exotic oriental contexts, led him to rework his concept of *Salammbô*. From the 1910s onwards, Bussière regularly photographed models to recreate his figures. One of them was painted for his *La danse de Salomé ou Les papillon d'or* (1923), based on Oscar Wilde's play. The same photograph inspired his interpretation of the famous sensual encounter between *Salammbô* and the prophetic and terrifying Python (*Salammbô* 1920). The painting shows both the snake and *Salammbô*, with long black-hair, next to each other. Bussière very effectively plays with shadows to offer us a delicate nude, partially illuminated by the warm light of the moon. *Salammbô*'s stylised body transmits fear and fragility, matching Flaubert's words – '*elle se sentait mourir*' – while her spectral gaze is again disturbingly directed towards the viewer/voyeur.

The striking bronze sculpture by Théodore Rivière, *Salammbô chez Mâtho. Je t'aime! Je t'aime* (1895), reproduces the moment of the encounter between Mathô and *Salammbô* in the tent of the mercenary. Rivière's sculpture is an extraordinary essay on extreme emotions and erotic tensions. The artist proposes a contrast between the violent, corporeal dynamism of the kneeling, half-naked Mathô, and a majestically dressed *Salammbô*, standing in a hieratical, statuesque, and clearly dominant, position. While in the novel *Salammbô* seems to be in some sort of trance,³² Rivière's piece represents one of the most iconic portraits of the Oriental *femme fatale*. Eroticism, fatal seduction, strangeness, cruelty and certain inhuman (or supernatural) attributes all contributed to shaping this idea, which was moulded by the

Décadence, and that to some degree expressed the fear of empowered women menacing masculine spheres of comfort.³³

The popularisation of Salammbô as an icon of Carthage at the turn of the twentieth century led to a shadowing of her alter egos, the legendary Dido and the historical Sophonisba. I would like to finish this section with a most curious case study that shows the enthroneing of Salammbô in Western popular culture. The *Liebig Extract of Meat Company* (est. 1865) was an international brand that introduced an infallible marketing strategy. Thousands of trading cards with colourful lithographs devoted to the history of humanity, science and the arts were distributed with the product. The didactic impact of this collectable encyclopaedia was comparable to that of popular illustrated history books. An early card-series, *Famous women of ancient times* (1897), portrays six women associated with the symbols and settings of the culture they embody: Sappho (Greece), Agrippina (Rome), Cleopatra (Egypt), Thusnelda (Germania), Semiramis (Assyria) and, of course, Salammbô (Carthage) [insert Figure 6.2 here]. Flaubert's figure is the only one that is purely fictitious. This choice reflects the culmination of a process of recognition of Salammbô as a popular icon in collective imagination, a status that transcends any historicity. For the *fin-de-siècle* Western viewer, the Carthaginian Salammbô might have appeared as real as the Egyptian Cleopatra. Her triumph as a universal star cannot be disassociated from Flaubert's talent for creating a world that stands alone as a captivating visual fantasy of the Other.

The colourfully clothed Salammbô on the Liebig card appears accompanied by the prophetic snake, but her outfit strongly resembles popular representations of modern Egyptian Ghawazee dancers. Certainly, she more closely resembles Kuchuk than Flaubert's heroine. Her embellishments include golden chains binding her bare feet, an Orientalist license with no connection to the novel. This element is aimed at punctuating the idea of a vaguely defined 'enslaved' foreign culture.³⁴ Behind the figure of Salammbô, some architectonic elements of the city can be distinguished. Among them the partially hidden staircase and façade of

Moloch's temple. Flaubert's description of the outside view of the temple is intentionally vague, an '*endroit sinistre*', darkened by shadows, while the building itself is simply described as a '*monstrueux tombeau*'. The illustrator of the lithograph interprets this monstrous tomb as a gigantic head with arms flanking the mouth-like entrance of the building. The anonymous artist was probably inspired by a popular painting from Henry-Paul Motte entitled *Baal Moloch dévorant les prisonniers à Babylone* (1876).³⁵ Motte's work shows a similarly sphinx-like temple of Baal, receiving masses of people that are about to be sacrificed.³⁶ The link between Baal-Moloch and human sacrifices appears in the Bible, and was explicitly linked to the Phoenician-Punic Moloch and to Carthage by Roman historiography.³⁷ Flaubert revamped this tradition to shape his own version of a god that rises as an eclectic signifier of the sinister 'East'. From a deeper, psychological perspective, Moloch reveals not only the dark side of Carthage and Salammbô, but also a strangely familiar territory of discomfort, the spirit of which inhabits all of us.³⁸ On the Liebig card, the half-hidden temple that remains in Salammbô's shadow seems to symbolically announce a new age for Moloch – that will crystallise in early cinema – and the evanescence of the Carthage's heroines.

The visual afterlives of Salammbô in popular imagination, alongside her enthronisation as a symbol of eroticised exoticism, absorbed and to a large degree dissolved the memory and ascendancy of Dido and Sophonisba, just as Virgil's Dido had almost silenced other versions of her biographies. Flaubert constructed a character aimed at shaking consciences, but her visual reincarnations did not always capture that spirit. She was frequently reduced to a visual fantasy for male voyeurism, as was the Egyptian dancer Kuchuk. Flaubert's Salammbô was not an ordinary woman, but neither was she a *femme fatale*. Her inscrutable spirituality was intended to transport the reader to an uncanny territory, yet somehow also contributed to popularising an objectified stereotype of female eroticism

that was interchangeable with other Eastern women like Salomé, Cleopatra and the Queen of Sheba.

The Vanished Woman

The lure of Carthage and its women gradually faded away with the arrival of cinema. The marginalisation of Dido, Sophonisba and Salammbô, as well as the scarce attention paid to Punic civilisation by the medium, can be partially explained by the irresistible appeal of Cleopatra's Egypt as an ideal – and visually and culturally more defined – feminised nemesis of Rome. Hollywood's preference for the Roman Civil Wars rather than the Punic Wars also explains this neglect, as well as its interest in biblical stories, rather than the 'elusive Easternness' of Carthage.³⁹

The cinematic oblivion of Carthage found a remarkable exception in the flourishing pre-World War I Italian film industry, in which Carthage towered over the country's contemporary geo-political agenda and colonial aspirations in Africa.⁴⁰ The Italo-Turkish War (1911-12), and the subsequent Italian invasion of Libya, Cyrenaica and Tripolitana, increased interest in ancient Carthage. Italy's colonial ambitions in Africa found in the Punic Wars and the confrontation between Rome and Carthage a suitable theme to explore strategies of identification and opposition between ancient empires and modern nations. Following this momentum, three films featuring Carthaginian topics were produced in Turin during the same year (1914). They attest to the fierce competition that existed for a theme that would appeal to modern audiences. The discrete *Salambô*, directed by Domenico Gaido, competed with an adaptation of Emilio Salgari's successful novel *Cartagine in Fiamme* (1906), called *Delenda Cartago!* Both of these were destined to remain in the shadows of the immortal *Cabiria*, however. Giovanni Pastrone's masterpiece, with contributions from the prestigious writer Gabriele D'Annunzio, remains a milestone in the history of cinema.⁴¹

Cabiria merges a fictional plot with several episodes from the Second Punic War, including Hannibal crossing the Alps, the siege of Syracuse, the Battle of Cirta and the final victory of Scipio Africanus at Zama (202 BCE). In between these, the tragic story of Sophonisba provides a touch of visual Orientalism, and above all else, her depiction illustrates Pastrone's interest in haunting the spectator with an exotic, 'monumental' atmosphere. To this end, the recreation of Carthage made use of accurate Punic and near-Eastern iconographic elements, as well as pioneering cinematic techniques to enhance authenticity.⁴² The film's major aesthetic influence was none other than Flaubert's *Salammbô*. Both succeed in recreating a world that stands as an epitome of the irrational Other. Yet unlike the novel, Pastrone's characterisation of a *Salammbonian* Sophonisba remains in the background, overshadowed by the movie's most iconic and spectacular motif, the terrifying temple of Moloch, and by the shocking sacrifice of children on the altar-statue of the god.⁴³

More than twenty years after *Cabiria*, fascist Italy addressed its own colonial ambitions following the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. *Scipione l'Africano* (1937) was a propaganda film that suggested a clear parallel between Scipio and Mussolini. The morally ambiguous Sophonisba from Pastrone's movie is here a manipulative *femme fatale* dominated by extreme passions and a deep hatred of the Romans. Her Art Deco outfit and her body language combine to build a stylised Sophonisba, albeit one that was unfortunately marginalised in the plot. Interestingly, while the promotion of the movie in Italy highlighted the figure of the Roman general and the spectacular battle scenes, in Nazi Germany the film was advertised very differently. The title of the movie was changed to *Karthagos Fall. Rom's Kampf um's Mittelmeer* (*The Fall of Carthage. Rome's Fight for the Mediterranean*), thus depersonalising the conflict. Accordingly, the cover of the *Illustrierter Film-Kurier* magazine (n. 2837, 1937) [insert Figure 6.3 here] does not feature Scipio. Instead, Rome appears characterised by the masses assembled in the forum around a Capitulum-style temple, giving a fascist salute. Superimposed onto this scene (which celebrates Rome's collective identity), the foreground

features a striking close-up of Sophonisba holding the cup containing poison. This image proposes a confrontation between two cultural models, one dominated by the power of the people and their institutions, the other by *feminised* weakness and irrationality, all personified by Sophonisba. The Semitic background of the Carthaginian civilisation reinforces this opposition from a viewpoint that conveniently suited to National Socialism. The fall of Carthage announced in the title is thus associated with the poison and the Carthaginian woman's death. It is she, rather than the ambivalent hero Hannibal, who embodies the idea of the barbarian Other opposed to the collective values of Republican Rome.

Still, the portrait of Sophonisba in these Italian movies remains schematic and stereotyped. This neglect of the Carthaginian women is also present in the few films that attempted to adapt Flaubert's *Salammbô*. Gaido's *Salammbô* (1914) changes the narrative of the story into a happy-ever-after romance. Far closer to the source novel is the French-Austrian *Salammbô* (1925), directed by Pierre Marodon. The film is a monumental canvas filled with Assyrian and Punic visual elements, Art Deco costumes and the Orientalist music of Florent Schmitt. The stage diva Jeanne de Balzac looks splendid in the protagonist's part, but her static, almost statuesque, performance fails to transmit the emotional and uncanny portrait created by Flaubert. Marodon's film confirmed the impossible task of adapting a novel whose main strength lies not in the plot, but in the discomfiting atmosphere, which also shapes the characters. This handicap explains why *Salammbô* only returned to cinema during the age of Peplum when many productions looked for inspiration in the silent era. Sergio Grieco's *Salammbô* (1960) reunites typical traits of the genre, including the conventional romance and happy-ending story. Carthage here appears as an aesthetically eclectic oriental place, while *Salammbô* herself fulfils the role of the typically plain damsel of Peplum. Salgari's novel *Cartagine in fiamme* was revisited in a 1960 movie that constructs a weak adventure of heroism and love in which women play a secondary role. The film is remembered for the return of Moloch and human sacrifices into cinema. Faithful to Polybius's

account of 146 BCE, both the novel and the film include the anecdote of the anonymous wife of the general Hasdrubal the Boetharch who, unlike her husband, preferred to immolate herself and her children in the flames than be enslaved by the Romans.⁴⁴ This act of dignity strongly recalls Dido's sacrifice, but also Sophonisba's actions, and even the death of Salammbô.

Cabiria's success, and its deserved reputation in the history of cinema, give us some clues to the medium's trends. In *Cabiria*, the space rules over the characters. There are no close-ups of the protagonists, who become the instruments of an exercise in the cultural recognition of a monumental and sinister place, one that is dominated by the horrifying Moloch. Carthage remains an elusive 'Eastern' place in cinema, defined only by its opposition to Rome. In this scenario, there is little place for a Dido and a Sophonisba, and certainly none for a Salammbô. Anecdotal, yet symptomatic of this trend, is a scene from Orson Welles' masterpiece *Citizen Kane* (1941). The wife of the protagonist, a frustrated singer of dubious talent, performs as an extravagant Salammbô in a disastrous operatic adaptation produced by her husband. This staged fiction of luxurious decadence reflects the true emptiness that shapes the lives of the protagonists. To us, this symbolic operatic Salammbô represents a relic of an almost forgotten *fin-de-siècle* fantasy, an exhausted model of aesthetic and exotic glamour that seems to have no place in modern twentieth century fictional entertainment.

The Resurrected Woman

And yet: everything dies to be reborn. The flames that united Dido's death with the destruction of Carthage were also a fire of resurrection and revival. What cinema failed to create – a memorable portrait of Carthaginian leading women – was achieved by television. Franco Rossi's *Eneide* (1971) was a series created for Italian public television (RAI). Rossi's adaptation of Virgil followed the success of his previous *L'Odissea* (1968), and as then he

relied on talented collaborators and spectacular scenery to recreate the various topographies of the Virgilian epic.⁴⁵ Influenced by Pasolini's and his own setting of Medea's Colchis in Cappadocia, Dido's Carthage was recreated using the stunning rocky landscapes of the Bamiyan valley in Afghanistan. Rossi made use of the impressive cliffs, as well as one of the gigantic carved Buddhas destroyed by the Taliban in 2001, as the monumental physiognomy of Dido's city. The mysterious faceless Buddha statue features in *Eneide* as an unnamed god that pre-dates the arrival of the Tyrians. Rossi's Dido is given form by the Greek actress Olga Karlatos, whose performance communicates the internal conflicts of a female ruler caught between her duties to her people and a passionate love turned to inconsolable grief.⁴⁶ Dido's dignified portrait in *Eneide* overshadows the hero, Aeneas, who often looks disoriented and undetermined. Rossi's Dido goes beyond the Virgilian reading of the character and explores the alternative versions attached to the historical Elissa, as well as her post-classical reworkings by authors like Marlowe and Purcell.⁴⁷ In this light should be read a relevant scene of the film, a ritual procession and sacrifice, presided over by Dido, that takes place in front of the temple of the faceless god (the largest of the Buddhas). An offscreen voice explains that the rite was an ancient Tyrian tradition that consisted of burning a simulacrum of a king. The 'killing' of the king made it possible for his spirit to merge with the inhabitants of the city, from whom a new ruler would emerge. This scene both anticipates and provides a new reading of Dido's death on the pyre. Beyond the strangeness of the place she inhabits, this Tyrian Dido transmits empathy to the spectator; we understand her suffering and the reasons for her despair. Her grief and melancholic attitude make her approachable. Her death is a touching scene, in which all these human emotions collide.

Was Dido's death truly unavoidable? This question addresses Virgil's instrumentalisation of her fall, a necessary vehicle for an epic, larger than life story that transcends myth and history, from the flames of Troy to those of the destroyed Carthage. In 1905, the French author Jules Lemaître presented in his short story *Anna Soror* a

provocatively alternative reading of the epilogue of *Aeneid*'s book IV. This story, inspired by the 'other Didos', was included in Lemaître's book *En marges des vieux livres* (1905), a work that aimed to rewrite the lives of epic heroes into fables. In *Anna Soror*, Dido's sister and confidant saves her from death through a gesture of love. When she recovers, the pragmatic Anna confronts Dido with the absurdity of her unrequited love to Aeneas and convinces her to accept a marriage of convenience to the Numidian Iarbas.⁴⁸ On the way to her new down-to-earth life, Dido finally understands that the pious Aeneas, guided by fate, was not the model man she needed. This modernising fable ends with an encounter between Dido and a Phoenician merchant, who has just landed in Carthage and tells her about Aeneas' bad experiences in Latium. She gives the merchant a very important message for her former lover: '*Dites-lui que Didon n'est pas morte*' ('Tell him that Dido is not dead').

Dido is not dead; *Didone non è morta* is in fact the title of a film directed and co-written by the feminist artist Lina Mangiacapre in 1987.⁴⁹ The film, like Lemaître's story, proposes an alternative life for the Tyrian Queen. In Mangiacapre's film, the Queen returns to 1980s Naples, where she reunites with her former lover Aeneas, now a photographer. While Dido's second life is that of an independent woman, Aeneas's intellectual nudity – his lack of determination and will – are exposed. His Virgilian qualities – his pious character and blind obeisance to divine plans – once so praised and useful, look faintly ridiculous in the late twentieth century. Aeneas is here closer to the anti-hero depiction outlined by Ovid. While Dido is master of her own destiny, Aeneas is inexorably trapped by it. As Mangiacapre herself explained, the movie arose from her interest in the founding myths of Carthage and Naples, both territories colonised by foreign peoples, both linked by two women – Dido and the Siren Parthenope – fatally in love with two men, Aeneas and Odysseus.⁵⁰ The choice of locations, the volcanic scenery of Pozzuoli and the Campi Flegrei, and the post-industrial urban landscapes of the harbour-city Naples, all stress the importance of fire and the sea as natural forces that determine the destiny of the protagonists, but also emphasise the cyclic, immortal

character of myths. Dido, like a Phoenix, dies to be reborn.⁵¹ Mangiacapre invites the viewer to look directly at this modern, empowered Dido, finally liberated from the corset of traditions – including Orientalism – that insisted on undermining her as a failed female ruler ruined by irrational passions.⁵²

Unlike Dido, Salammbô never experienced a comeback in the moving image, but her unbeaten exoticism suited very well the creative freedom of comics. The priestess of Tanit is evoked in *Le spectre de Carthage* (1977), from the popular graphic novels series *Les Aventures d'Alix* (1948) created by Jacques Martin. In this story, Dido, Moloch and Salammbô are recalled as enduring memories of Carthage's past glories, but also as rather phantasmagoric presences that still menace the Roman city of the present. Martin's work recalls the fascinating, yet mysterious world created by Flaubert, while confirming Salammbô's status as a *historicised* heroine who transcends fiction.

The most remarkable example of the popularity of Flaubert's heroine in late twentieth century visual culture is Philippe Druillet's cult comic trilogy *Salammbô* (1981-86), a flamboyant futuristic fantasy that abandons any attempt to accurately translate and adapt Flaubert's novel and its context, whilst succeeding in creating a similarly epic spectacle. Druillet introduces into the story his space-traveller hero, Lone Sloane, who takes the place of Mathô. This science-fiction Carthage is a place dominated by an archaic idea of religion, in which life and death, peace and violence, cohabit in harmony. Then there is Salammbô. The priestess of Tanit is a woman of stunning, yet non-canonical beauty. Druillet's artwork, which underlines her erotic nudity, is not a simple modernisation of the statuesque *femme fatale* model and is certainly far from the plain versions of the character seen in her brief encounters with cinema.⁵³ The exaggerated, stylised, curved and angular forms of her naked body, the use of symmetry and the contrasting colours connect this Salammbô with expressionist and primitivist art. Druillet was interested in Flaubert's transgressive modernity, in his creation of a deeply ancestral, religious society, and in Salammbô as a symbol and an interpreter of that

mystic spirit. Following this idea, Druillet found aesthetic inspiration in Magdalenian art and Prehistoric and African Venuses, which exaggerate and idealise the female body as symbol of fertility and conception. His work attempts to capture that idea of a femininity rooted in the primitive myth of creation and the forces of nature. For Druillet, modernity lies in the cave of Lascaux.⁵⁴ His *Salammbô* opened a new window, through which Flaubert's figure can be vindicated as an alternative idea of the feminine.⁵⁵

Conclusions

Back to 1807. In his evocation of the women who shaped the life and death of Carthage, Chateaubriand created an enduring connection between them and the city they embodied. The solemn words he devoted to Dido also alluded to the creation of myths, which are nothing but history elevated by the Muses to the category of truth.⁵⁶ Until the twentieth century, the sites of Carthage and Punic Civilisation were largely seen as elusive cultural geographies filled with the biased views of Roman narrators and the Eastern fantasies of Western imagination. Carthage was essentially portrayed as Rome's nemesis. As such, the myth of Hannibal as military genius aimed to further elevate the grandeur of Scipio and Rome. In the same vein, Dido, Sophonisba and the anonymous wife of general Hasdrubal represented the cultural characterisations of an inferior, feminine Carthage, destined to be subjugated by Rome's model of superior civilisation. As has been discussed in this chapter, the Virgilian Dido fed modern imageries of a tragedy moulded by fate and by these cultural dichotomies. This model was replicated in countless depictions of Sophonisba, which also accentuated the motif of revenge. Alternative Didos cohabited alongside this model during the Renaissance, when the subject of chastity and fidelity recalled Punic traditions of the fugitive Elissa. Marlowe's *Dido, Queene of Carthage* remains a remarkable attempt to rehabilitate Dido as a capable leader, mirroring Queen Elizabeth's own ruling model and ambitions. The exoticism of

Carthage was particularly underscored by distinguished Grand Tourists and artists inspired by the enchanting fragrances of Orientalism, and by the spectacular discoveries of ancient near-Eastern cultures. In this scenario, the fictitious Salammbô embodied a certain idea of the Orient. Despite Flaubert's extraordinary design of a place and characters that feel authentic, the visual reincarnations of Salammbô at the turn of the twentieth century tended to reduce her to an erotic symbol, often detached from her context. One interesting result of the case studies analysed here is the idea that Salammbô's enthronisation to the Olympus of universal icons, and as *the* image of Carthage, implied a marginalisation of Dido and Sophonisba in popular imagination. Salammbô's popularity transformed her into a 'real' character, thus inverting Chateaubriand's model of history becoming myth. Devoid of the deep meaning given to her by Flaubert, Salammbô became an ancient Oriental creature with interchangeable skills and qualities. In a certain way, Salammbô almost killed the memories of Carthage. When cinema encountered Punic Civilisation, the women of Carthage were progressively eclipsed by the spirit of place that was dominated by the sinister lure of Moloch. The resurrection of the Carthaginian women during the late twentieth century was already announced in the alternative fable of Dido's second life, as signed by Lemaître. However, this renaissance was accompanied by a progressive *Westernisation* of these women, and their detachment from the Orientalising traits and contexts in which they were traditionally integrated. Dido's awakening in post-industrial Naples as an empowered, modern, feminist woman is a form of poetic justice that confirms the validity of the cyclical nature and the myth of eternal return already explored by Flaubert. Meanwhile, the wandering Salammbô seems to have found a suitable new home, beyond the frontiers of time and space.

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- ¹ Fr-R. Chateaubriand, *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*, 1st publ. 1811, ch. 7 (ed. Gallimard 2005): 489-540, 720-6. On the feminine character attributed to Carthage by ancient authors, see Bonnet 2011.
- ² *A revised American edition of the Readers' handbook (vol. I)*, edited by E. C. Brewer.
- ³ This story was attributed to Timaeus of Tauromenium (*FGrH* 3b.566.82), cited by Trogus and later Justin, 18.4–6. On the founding of Carthage, see also Appian (1.1-2) and Flavius Josephus, who in *Against Apion* quotes Menander of Ephesus and the *List of the Kings of Tyre*, *Ap.* 1.18; 1.106-127. On Elissa in ancient sources, see Ladjimi Sebai 1995. On Virgil's reworking of this tradition, see Starks 1999.
- ⁴ On Virgil's construction of a Dido opposed to Rome, see Davidson 1990.
- ⁵ Dido's chastity as a Christian virtue had already been emphasised in Augustine's *Confessions* 1.13.20-21.
- ⁶ Around the 1550s, Alessandro Cesati created a medal inspired by Roman coins from the Severan period that celebrated Dido as builder and ruler.
- ⁷ Ausonius, *Epigr. Al.* 30: *Infelix Dido nulli bene nupta marito: hoc pereunte fugis, hoc fugiente peris* (Transl. Waring).
- ⁸ The striking *Morte di Didone* (1625), a Baroque painting by Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (Guercino), which portrays the scene as the death of a virgin bride, is symptomatic of this.
- ⁹ Gamel (2005: 613) notes the influence of Ovid's *Heroides* 7 on the play, and the linguistic and dramaturgic centrality of Dido.
- ¹⁰ As Williams (2006: 32-47) has convincingly argued, the Elizabethan Dido found in the non-Virgilian traditions a more suitable model of identification for a female ruler.
- ¹¹ Williams (2006: 34) interprets Virgil's treatment of Dido as a means of reducing Carthage from an expansionist rival equivalent to Rome to an 'inferior geography', a colonised territory symbolised by Aeneas' sexual domination of Dido. Dido's curse of Aeneas and his descendants only reinforces this idea.
- ¹² Purcell and Tate's opera was preceded by *Didone*, an opera released in Venice in 1641 with libretto of Gian Francesco Brusenello and music by Francesco Cavallo.
- ¹³ Schmalfeldt (2001: 611-614) has noticed the differences to the Virgilian text. The author argues that Purcell's music confers on Dido a sympathetic human character that devalues Aeneas to a secondary role.
- ¹⁴ The depiction of Dido's death as a collective drama of grief was a constant theme in Baroque painting, e.g. Sébastien Bourdon, *La mort de Didon* (1637/49).

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- ¹⁵ Notable examples of the interest in Sophonisba's death are the paintings by Giovanni-Battista Zelotti (1569-70), Guercino (1639), Nicolas Régnier (c. 1645), Mattia Pretti (c. 1675), Simon Vouet (c. 1623), Andrea Casali (1743) and Jean Charles Nicaise Perrin (1783).
- ¹⁶ J. M. W. Turner's *The decline of the Carthaginian Empire* (1817) further highlights this narrative. Turner depicts a crepuscular Carthage in which women and children hopelessly await their fate. The painting can be read as an allegory of the Ottoman Empire, but also of other Empires like the Napoleonic and British.
- ¹⁷ 'I am not a woman; I am a world. My cloths have but to fall, and you shall discover upon my person a succession of mysteries!' (transl. M. Walter Dunne).
- ¹⁸ Said ([1978] 2003: 184-187) concedes to Flaubert a relevant role in the shaping of nineteenth century Orientalism in France. According to Said, Kuchuk reminded Flaubert of the goddess Tanit. The Egyptian dancer also inspired Flaubert's depiction of Salomé in the tale *Hérodias*, published in *Trois Contes* (1977).
- ¹⁹ Letter to Ernest Feydeau, 29/30th Nov. 1859. Aillagon (1995: 19).
- ²⁰ Polyb. 1.65.
- ²¹ This narrative had an important cultural momentum thanks to the popular Romantic opera *Les Troyens à Carthage* (libretto 1958, released in 1963) by Louis-Hector Berlioz, which explored the genesis of Rome's nemesis in Dido's desire for revenge.
- ²² See Sainte-Bouve's criticism in the journal *Nouveaux Lundis* (22 Dec. 1862.4: 84). Séginger (2003/4: 41-2) discusses Flaubert's opposition to the traditional philosophical vision of history as a rational succession of events that suit politics. On *Salammô* as a criticism of nineteenth century France, see Durr 2002.
- ²³ Influential works like Dureau de La Malle's *Recherches sur la Topographie de Carthage* (1835) contributed to this interest in the Punic city.
- ²⁴ Séginger (2013) discusses Flaubert's interest in the Heraclitean idea of human life as a dynamic cycle, as well as in the works of Naturalists like Louis Bouilhet and his poem *Les Fossiles* (1854); see also Percheron 2015. Flaubert made use of Punic-Phoenician religious syncretism, in line with the works of Ernest Renan. On Flaubert's opposition to Biblical anthropocentrism, see Blix 2013: 724. As Toumayan notes (2008), Flaubert confronts the reader with the concepts of civilisation and barbarism.
- ²⁵ On the influence of Sade in the ritualisation of horror and violence in the novel, see Séringer 2003: 47. The symbolism of exotic and violent animals, and the animalistic behaviour of certain characters, underscores the characterisation of Carthage as non-anthropocentric, cf. Blix 2013.

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- ²⁶ Théophile Gautier qualified the novel as an epic poem, Eugène Fromentin described Flaubert as a great painter and visionary, while Guy de Maupassant and George Sand mentioned the operatic and musical virtues of *Salammbô*. Berlioz admitted his fascination and horror for the mysterious *Salammbô*. Jullien (2013) argues that Flaubert impregnated his novel with a sense of the spectacular by means of almost impressionistic pictorial canvasses in the form of Orientalistic *tableau vivants*.
- ²⁷ The imageries inspired by *Salammbô* are analysed in the issues 11 and 12 (2014) of the journal *Flaubert. Revue Critique et Génétique*. Available online: <http://journals.openedition.org/flaubert/> (last accessed 10 June 2019).
- ²⁸ The first illustrated editions were not published until 1884 (by Pierre Vidal), George Rochegrosse's (1900) being the most famous. Ernest Reyer's polemic opera *Salammbô* (1890), with a libretto by Camille du Locle, and Andrei Arends' homonymous ballet for the Bolshoi Theater (1910) are notable examples of successful transfigurations of the novel. The set and costumes of Arends' innovative ballet were designed by Kostantin Korovin who, inspired by the sensorial plasticity of the novel, created a colourful, eclectically oriental Carthage.
- ²⁹ On *Salammbô* in late nineteenth century visual arts, see Kohle 1998.
- ³⁰ The scene illustrates *Salammbô*'s invocation of Tanit. On Mucha's *Salammbô*, see Warren 2017: 125-7.
- ³¹ A second version of the painting shows the same figure in a pose that suggests a more active seduction.
- ³² Throughout the novel, Flaubert insists on *Salammbô*'s hypnotic state and the divine force that seemed to drive her actions.
- ³³ The epitome of this phenomenon was Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1891).
- ³⁴ The representation of golden foot chains as a symbol of slavery are typical of Orientalism, e.g. Emile Prisse d'Avennes, *Egyptian Dancing Girls Performing the Ghawazi at Rossetta* (1848).
- ³⁵ Motte was a pupil of Jean-Léon Gérôme. The painting was presented in the Salon of 1874 and was later popularised in history books.
- ³⁶ The scene shows a monumental setting with distinctive Neo-Assyrian iconographies. The gigantic Sphinx is crowned with an Egyptian-like wig and horns, and flanked by pylons.
- ³⁷ Jeremiah (19.5) explicitly mentions the sacrifice of children to Baal, who is compared to Moloch (32.35). See also, Diod. 20.14.
- ³⁸ The term *das Unheimliche* is defined by Freud (1919) in connection to aesthetics as something frightening but not necessarily strange to the human psyche.

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- ³⁹ On the city of Carthage in cinema, see García Morcillo 2015 (with bibliography).
- ⁴⁰ An example of the declining Carthaginian women in early cinema is *Didone Abbandonata* (Maggi, 1910), a now lost filmic adaptation of Pietro Metastasio's libretto (1724). The film reduced the plot to a love triangle between Aeneas, Dido and her pretender, Iarbas, while the Tyrian Queen is portrayed as a typical nineteenth century operatic diva. Carthage is recreated as a distinctive Eastern place with a neo-Assirian look, yet punctuated by African elements. Black servants and the skins of wild animals are there to remind the viewer that Carthage is, after all, neither Babylon nor Khorsabad.
- ⁴¹ On the impact and influence of *Cabiria* in the history of cinema, see Wyke 1997: 188-204; Bertetto and Rondolino 1998; Alovio and Barbera 2006.
- ⁴² The film makes remarkable use of Phoenician-Punic iconography, including for instance the *stelae* of Carthage's Tophet, published by Alfred-Louis Delattre in 1900. On the semantic use of scenography in the movie, see Bertetto 1998: 206-7. On *Cabiria*'s pioneer travelling shots that emphasise cultural characterization through the exploration of space, see Dragada, Gaudrenault and Gunning 1998.
- ⁴³ The iconic temple of Moloch in *Cabiria* looks very similar to those in Motte's engraving and on the Liebig card, which suggests to me that they could have been possible sources of inspiration for the film.
- ⁴⁴ Polyb. 38.7-8.
- ⁴⁵ The cinematography of the movie was directed by Vittorio Storaro, while Mario Nascimbene created the soundtrack. The consultants of the series included the Latinist Luca Canali and the well-known literary critics Carlo Bo and Geno Pampaloni.
- ⁴⁶ Karlatos' convincing performance, and the many virtues of Rossi's *Eneide* have been analysed by Winkler 2013.
- ⁴⁷ This explains, for instance, as Winkler (2013: 146-7) has noted, the intentional echoes of Purcell's *Dido's Lament* in Nascimbene's *Canto di Didone*, used in the movie as a leitmotiv that anticipates the end.
- ⁴⁸ A comparative analysis of *Anna Soror* and the sources reworked by Lemaître is provided by Brescia 2007.
- ⁴⁹ The film was co-written by Adele Cambria and produced by the cooperative *Tre Ghinee*. For more on the film and other works by Mangiacapre, see: <http://www.lenemesiache.it/> (last accessed 10 June 2019).
- ⁵⁰ In an interview for the journal *La Repubblica* (12 November 1986), Mangiacapre makes a plea in favour of the fundamental cultural and social function of ancient myths.

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- ⁵¹ In her lecture '*Didone non è morta*', *il fondamento filologico* (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris, 6-9 December 1988), Mangiacapre highlights the importance of the fraternal love between Anna and Dido as the immortal power that brings the Queen back to life.
- ⁵² Dido has made a successful re-entry in the twenty-first century as an ambitious and capable ancient oriental ruler with Semitic traits thanks to *Civilization V, Gods and Kings* (2012), the popular video game created by Sid Meier. The worldwide impact of the game, and the acceptance of the character as the personification of the imperialistic Carthage confirms Dido's deserved status as *femme forte* in the new Millennium.
- ⁵³ Lagerwall (2014) explores the kaleidoscopic depiction of Flaubert's heroine in the comic and her connections to other visual representations.
- ⁵⁴ '*Pour moi, la modernité c'est la grotte de Lascaux*'. Druillet discusses his sources in a series of interviews on the occasion of an exhibition of his artwork entitled *Salammbô, le nus*, at the Gallery Pascal Gabert (Paris) in 2010: *Le Figaro* 4 June 2010; Program *L'Invité*, TV5Monde 19 July 2010; *DJcarre Productions* 1 October 2010.
- ⁵⁵ In this line, the graphic artist Brandon S. Pilcher (Tiranno Ninja), has created a series of illustrations of famous ancient African women that address post-colonial deconstructions of Western classicism. These colorful black-African characters include Hatshepsut, Nefertiti, Cleopatra VII, Hypathia and Sophonisba. Cf. <https://tyrannoninja.deviantart.com/> (last accessed 10 June 2019).
- ⁵⁶ Chateaubriand, *Itinéraire* (1811), ch 7: '*L'histoire prend alors son rang parmi les Muses, et la fiction devient aussi grave que la vérité*'.